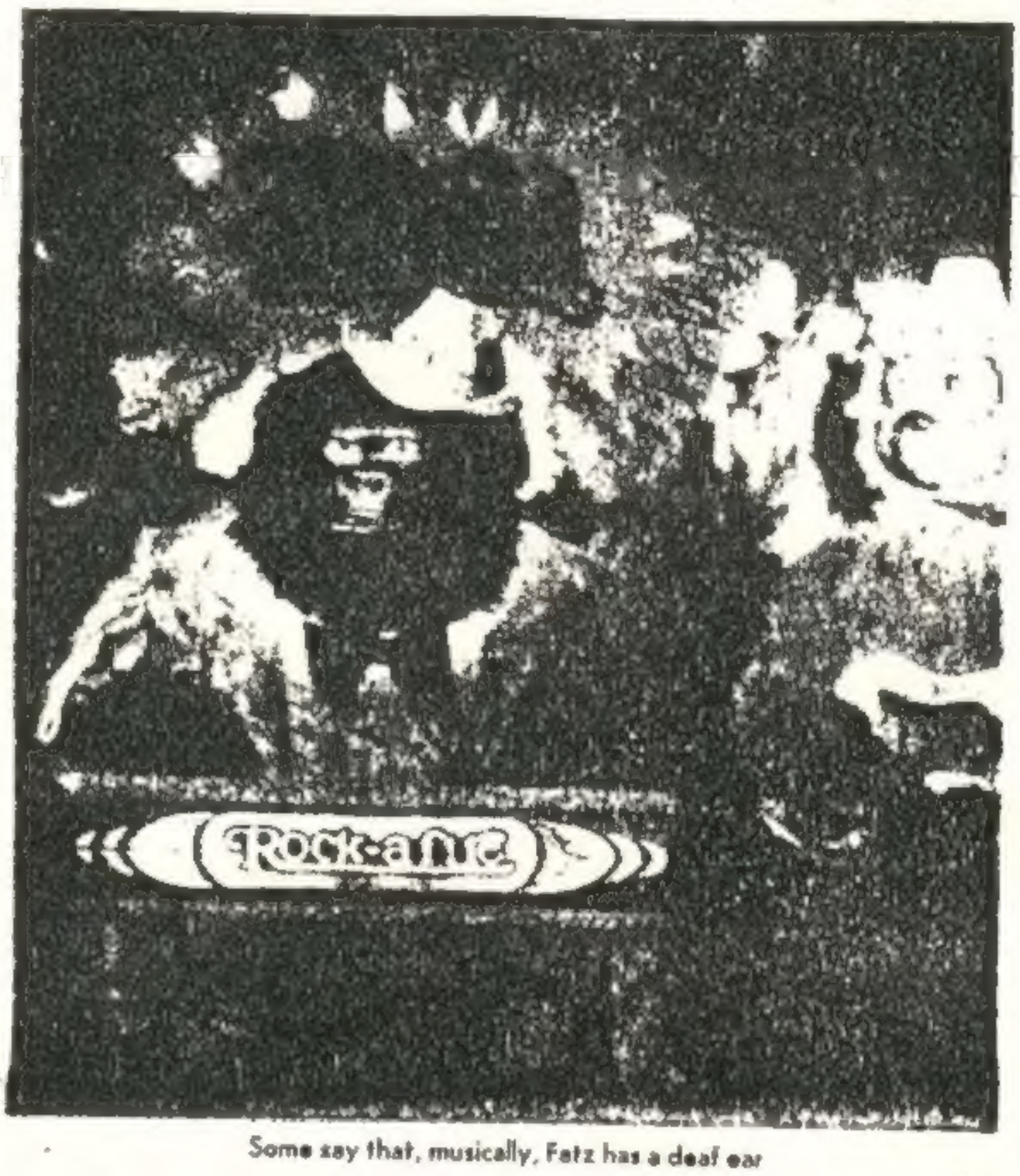
That's

Fatz, the animated ape who's unfazed by his band's phenomenal following at the pizza parlor



Some say that, musically, Fatz has a deaf ear

By Mickey Davis
Features Editor

He's the most popular entertainer in the Dayton area and he can't read a musical note.

His name's Fatz. Fatz who? Uh, just Fatz.

Some say, musically, he has a deaf ear, and that his fingers don't always hit the keys of that flashing synthesizer he's pounding on. Don't believe them. He's as talented as they come.

He doesn't belt out his Beatles' songs and rock and roll numbers from a night club downtown by the bus station, nor does he work the bar scene out on North Dixie, in Fairborn, Brookville, New Carlisle or any other sensual nighttime place.

He's never even played Hara.

The only thing about all this is that Fatz has absolutely no idea he's so good, or does he know that his fans, especially on their birthdays, are lining up outside his place to see him and the rest of the Rock-afire Explosion.

Why, even on a sunny Mother's Day, while most were treating their moms to dinner at fancy places like Bill Knapp's, there was a waiting line outside ShowBiz eager to catch a piece of the Rock.

Didn't faze Fatz a bit. Didn't do a thing to alter his King Kong-sized ego. Month-in, month out, he stays the same, except for a new elbow movement here, a roll of the eyes there, a scowl, a wink, maybe.

But, be forewarned, if you plan on celebrating your birthday with him, call ahead for reservations at least a week and a half in advance.

John Kenley should be so lucky.

Thinking that I could discover the secret of his success, I arrived for an interview with him between sets of a matinee performance on a recent Saturday. The audience had just finished applauding his rambling rendition of *Guitarzan*, when one woman dashed up quickly to the front with her One Step to snap a shot of him before the curtain closed. Fatz glared. The audience was still applauding, she got her photo and shuffled back to her seat.

I headed backstage, notebook and pencil ready, and he hadn't budged. Neither had the three others in his center-stage group.

"Hey, Fatz," I said, hoping to arouse him, "how do you continue to do it week after week like this, bringing in the crowds and all?"

He said nothing. Didn't even roll his eyes.

He was immobile, in fact.

Drugs, I thought. Maybe they've taken hold of good ol' Fatz, too, but nah, that couldn't be. Not Fatz. Beach Bear, maybe, but not Fatz.

I tried again.

"Is it the *We're Having a Birthday Party* song, Fatz? Is playing it night after night getting to you and [illegible] of musical expression?"

Again, no response. He just sat there.

"Are yuh sick, Fatz? Too much of the house pizza, maybe?"

Nothing.

Now, just about the time I was beginning to think that Fatz would replace Tony Randall as my all-time worst interview, his friend Mike Harmon, who says he understands pretty much what makes Fatz and Billy Bob tick, rescued me out of my predicament.

"He's just taking a rest," Harmon said. "We never bother him between sets. We just let him sit there. He works up quite a sweat out there and he needs this solitude before he goes back on stage. You understand?"

Yeh, sort of.

Harmon is the producer and manager at the ShowBiz Pizza Place, located, well, maybe, appropriately on Prestige Plaza in Miamisburg, next to the White Castle. Fatz and his Rock-afire Explosion, come November, will have been playing the Plaza almost two straight years.

And except for a malfunctioning computer part here, a busted hose there, a short in their wiring, they've never missed a set.

Never called in sick, either.

Fatz the gorilla, Billy Bob and the six others in this tight little group — Mitzi the cheerleader, Dook the drummer, lead guitarist Beach Bear, Looney Bird, and Rolfe de Wolfe and his puppet Earl Schmerle (or is it the other way around?) — are electronically-controlled robotic entertainers who, with the help of a double-reel tape deck and a guarded computer in the back room, come off like *Saturday Night Live* performers.

ShowBiz is such an in-place with 6- and 7-year-olds, a friend of mine was saying, that if they don't get to celebrate their birthday there with pizza, cake and a handful of video game tokens, they feel they've been forgotten.

The ShowBiz here is one of the most successful operations among almost 200 of the video and pizza parlors that have poked up around the country in the last three years: so successful, in fact, that the Midwest hierarchy at ShowBiz ordered Harmon not to advertise in the newspaper, on radio, TV or any place last month.

"They're attempting to find out how a place such as ours in a single market (the other closest ShowBiz places are in Springfield and at Tri-County) reaches the public and does so well," Harmon says.

Location near the Dayton Mall is one reason, he believes; also, there are no Chucky Cheese places in the Dayton area. (Chucky Cheese, a similar animated stage presentation, is a big challenger to ShowBiz for the kid buck in other cities.) There are, for instance, three ShowBiz places and three Chucky Cheese places in Cincinnati. "Also, it's not a hangout here for teen-agers as so many video games places are; 80 percent of our business is strictly family," he says. "Whatever the reasons, we've been very fortunate."

The pizza-games-entertainment package is a natural triple threat, but it's the animated version of the latter that lifts ShowBiz beyond the average scope of such places.

On Saturdays, especially during the summer months, 1,200 to 1,400 Fatz fans will visit his ShowBiz Pizza Place, Harmon says.

And if one of the Rock-afire Explosion characters breaks down, "it's dangerous out there," he says. "You get the problem patched up as soon as possible and whether it works or not, you just patch it up and go with it. Call the welder on Monday, but get on with the show now. It's the show that makes us; we'd be just another pizza joint without it."

Fatz on synthesizer, Billy Bob on guitar and his sidekick Looney Bird; Mitzi the cheerleader; drummer Dook the dog; Beach Bear, and Rolfe and his puppet keep an audience transfixed. Or, at the very least, intrigued. Maybe it's because that roll of an eyelid is precisely synchronized with the bang on a snare drum, or a jerk of the neck and a lift of the eyebrows coincides perfectly with the tempo of the country and western number being played.

Or, maybe it's because their music doesn't really sound that bad.

Whatever, you sit there wondering: yes, how in the world are they doing it? And sometimes you sit there wondering about yourself and why you're so caught up listening to this taxidermic outfit.

The kids, natch, are mesmerized, but to glance around and see that there are other parents who can't keep their eyes off this form of frolic is entertaining stuff, too.

Think about it: You'd never applaud the stuffed animals at the fair, but here you are clapping for a furry group of eight at the end of one of their sets.

Besides the synchronized movements of the arms and eyes and mouths with the beat of a song or momentum of a joke, what gives the show an additional sock of authenticity are the bloopers that are punched into each spiel — Mitzi apologizing for mistroducing Fatz; Fatz glaring back at her; Billy Bob muffing his lines, then asking the boys backstage if it's OK to try again.

About the only thing, thank goodness, that Fatz and the rest don't do — pardon the bias — is smoke.

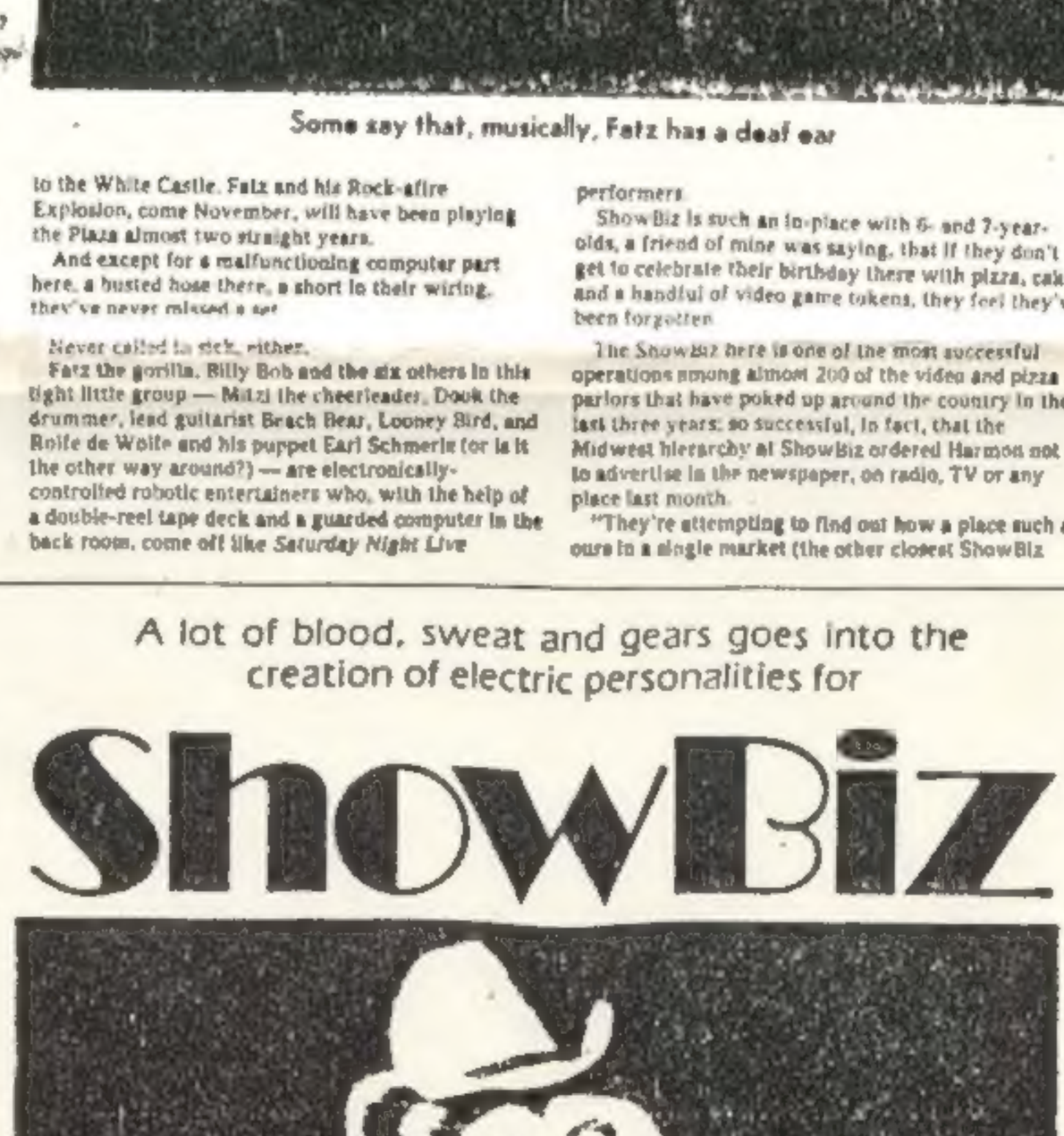
Maybe, one of these days, though, one of them will, because Creative Engineering, the brains, music and computer parts behind the group, is continually devising new arm and eye movements and fresh ways to make the characters come more to life. And, if all goes right, the audience will come more to life, too.

There was the Wednesday night last spring, a "Colander Night," when everyone came wearing decorated colanders on their heads and a lady from the Senior Citizens group got the big prize for the best colander hat. Fatz was inducting the audience into his club, and he asked them to stand and repeat the colander pledge, Harmon remembers, "and three-fourths of them were standing. There they were standing and responding dutifully to his dialogue. Sometimes, you just can't believe it."

Oh, yes you can, Mike; yes you can.

A lot of blood, sweat and gears goes into the creation of electric personalities for

ShowBiz



Staff photos by Eddie Roberts

Billy Bob, named for his creator's college roommate

By Mickey Davis
Features Editor

Mitzi, the pig-tailed cheerleader in the white sweater with the green block letter "M" on the front, has gone on a diet in most parts of the country. Not in Dayton, though, where plump is forever beautiful.

The current Mitzi at the Dayton area's only ShowBiz Pizza Place on Prestige Plaza has so many electrical wires, computer parts, air hoses, bearings, plastic castings, hinges and fiberglas stuffed into her digestive tract that she has the figure of a middle-aged chili parlor waitress — not one of the pubescent teen-ager she's supposed to be. No, sad to say, unlike the teen-ager in the 1950's rock and roll song, Mitzi doesn't "sway with a wiggle ... with a wiggle when she walks."

Sorry, Mitz, we love you, but you're a klutz.

That's one of the drawbacks of allowing technology to control one's appetite. And because the technology to limit Mitzi's inner body parts and reduce her weight wasn't discovered until sometime last year, Mitzi has remained fattish in most places; now Creative Engineering, the Orlando, Fla., manufacturer of Mitzi, Fatz the gorilla, and the other Rock-afire Explosion characters, including a new one, Uncle Klunk, has found a way to give Mitzi her thin waistline.

"We've been able to give her sex appeal," says a delighted friend, Aaron Fechter, by telephone. "She's always been concerned what others think about her; she's conscious of her peers and in that gawky stage. And she didn't want to look like an overstuffed moose. Now, she doesn't. Because with all that extra equipment out of her, she has more body movement and looks a lot better. We're always working to improve our characters, and if we are able to remove the sense of what they are — robots — and make them seem like characters who can think and perform as real people, then we're accomplishing what we set out to do."

Fechter, 29, a self-described "garage inventor," is president and founder of Creative Engineering. He's also the voice for Billy Bob, one of the show's featured stars who's named after his college roommate, Billy Bob Irvin, of Shelby, N.C., now an artist for Fechter's company.

Fechter, whose voice is similar to that of lead singer Peter Noone of Herman's Hermits — remember them? — got his start in developing electronic characters by doing animated groups for amusement parks. His country and western "Bear County Jubilee," a group he says is "a lot like Rock-afire Explosion," was the third show he had ever built, and since 1978 has been a featured attraction at Americana Park in Middletown.

It was that same year, Fechter recalls, that he got a big break when his "Wolfpack Five" electronically-animated rock group was a big hit at the convention of International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions people in New Orleans. Then, in 1979, he "got real lucky," when Bob Brock, then the president and now chairman of the board of ShowBiz Pizza Place, wanted his Rock-afire characters, including Mitzi, to play at all their pizza and videogame places.

Creative Engineering and ShowBiz signed a lifetime contract, Fechter says.

A year ago, ShowBiz had about 70 places around the country; today, that number has reached more than 180. Talk about Rock-afire explosion!

"We've been able to bring our characters to life in various stages, and now I'd like to take them another step beyond what we have now — to another generation," Fechter says. "We've got the music and the movements together, we have many of them in a memory bank now. So now we're working on the personality of each character, developing that to the fullest."

Besides discovering a diet to get rid of Mitzi's excess baggage of abdominal computer parts and pneumatic cylinders — I'm sure Mitzi is happier — Creative Engineering has found new ways to give Dook the Drummer more elbow movements. Now, Dook can bounce like Buddy Rich from the snare drum to the foot-operated crash cymbals to the high hat — and he's almost to the point where he can do a smooth drum solo. About the only thing Dook doesn't do is sweat. Fechter and his people are working on it.

In the meantime, they've introduced Uncle Klunk, who appears in 40 ShowBiz places around the country, but not Dayton. Klunk has taken the place of Rolfe de Wolfe and his puppet. Klunk is a talk show host — more in the mold of Bob Kuwesell than Johnny Carson — who has a phone sitting on a table next to him which he can lift and put back precisely in the cradle while picking out a banana from a bowl of fruit on the other side. He is witty, controversial and engages in repartee with the ShowBiz crowd and waitresses.

"We were concerned with an obvious need to change characters," Fechter says, "but Klunk hasn't set the world on fire as I hoped he could do."

Maybe they should have introduced Klunk in

(See That's ShowBiz on Page 24)

•That's ShowBiz

Continued from Page 21

Dayton, instead of Orlando. In all likelihood, judging from past performances, Klunk would have done real well at the ShowBiz here.

"The Dayton audience enjoys the work we naturally produce," Fechter says. "Rock-afire likes playing Dayton. The people in Orlando are real spoiled, maybe because we have Disney World and the Epcot Center; anyway, they aren't nearly as receptive to what we do as they are in Dayton."

Creative Engineering keeps close tabs on what various cities and communities like about their characters, Fechter says, "because the Rock-afire Explosion likes to play where it is liked; they enjoy being liked."

Fechter, who has a bachelor's degree in finance from the University of South Florida, talks of Fatz and his own character Billy Bob, Mitzi, Beach Bear and the rest much as a preschooler talks about a special teddy bear. He seems to enjoy living and thinking the way Billy Bob and Fatz might do, and maybe that's why he has been so successful at what he does.

He even feels sorry for Rollie, who has been replaced in some shows by Uncle Klonk.

"Rollie hasn't taken all this too well," Fechter says. "Now, he doesn't want to go along with 'Colander Night.'" (Wednesday nights at Showbiz places, patrons come dressed in colander hats and there's an induction of Al into Fatz's Colander Club.) "Rollie says he's against the colander movement and is starting his own movment, 'Small Appliances Night' where you drop a small appliance to your head and come on down. He's upset."

Of such empathy, good things to Aaron Fechter have come. That he has been successful in the less than 10 years he has been in the business is an understatement. Creative Engineering now employs 200 people in five plants in Orlando, including a special creative staff of 40 which initiates the electronic ideas, plans the songs, the arm and eye movements and the choreography, jokes and stage guffaws that fit various routines.

Each Rock-afire Explosion character is manufactured in groups of 25 and it takes about a week and a half to complete a group. A five-minute skit takes two to three days to complete, Fechter says, but that's progress, too, because a few years ago it took as long as three weeks to get one on tape.

Fechter, the voice for Billy Bob; Burt Allison, 26, the voice for Fatz; Shalissa Sloan, 12 (Mitzi); Duke Chauppetta, 31 (Klunk the Drummer), and Rick Bailey, 28 (Beach Bear), gather in a recording studio each week to play their instruments, sing and record the voices of their characters.

"We'll get around the microphone," Fechter says, "and I'm in control of the 'record' button and I start the button for the tape deck. That's it. We don't use an engineer. We tried that before, but we always had to retape our skits. What we want is good music, good jokes and spontaneity." So, more often than not, the mistakes that are made during the recording session find themselves onto the final tape.

Fechter credits Allison with much of the success of the group. Allison, he says, is an outstanding songwriter who has been selected to do the theme song for the World's Fair next year at New Orleans. "We wanted a bass voice for Fatz," Fechter says, "but we also got a good writer, a good composer and a good performer when we got Burt."

Once the sound track is finished, it is sent to the programmers where the individual movements of each character — each roll of the eyes, a guitar strum, a frown, drum beat, pat on the back — are recorded separately. Kathy Norman, who is "extremely talented," says Fechter, is responsible for synchronizing the music to the movements.

"Some tapes are easy; some are tougher," he says, but the objective is to match the movements with the jokes and the music and make them as natural as possible. There are about 15 songs to each ShowBiz show, which changes every few months. The current show lasts 90 minutes.

It is interesting to note, too, that while Billy Bob, Fechter's character, has been billed from the beginning as the featured Rock-afire Explosion attraction, Fatz, Wilson's character, has emerged as the big star.

Fatz is sort of a composite of Fats Domino, The Big Bopper and Muhammad Ali, Fechter says.

That Fatz has stolen some of the spotlight from Billy Bob wasn't in the design. "It just happened naturally," Fechter says, "but no doubt, he's the star. He's a character who works best with everyone."

Almost everyone who visits ShowBiz Pizza loves Fatz, Fechter says, but hardly a month goes by that Fechter doesn't receive a letter of complaint about the black gorilla with the bop-she-bop singing style. The focus of the complaints? Fatz fits the perpetuation of the black stereotype.

"That's completely wrong," Fechter counters. "Actually Fatz has a southern Louisiana style of dialect and though he's a gorilla, he's a character that works. Some people don't understand this, of course. They only want to see through these characters their own bigotries, and unfortunately I can't control what they want to see."

And, after listening to Fechter, you get the feeling he has been genuinely hurt because this has happened.

"We tried to put our show in at the University of South Florida, where I graduated," Fechter says, "and it didn't go over that hot. They didn't really see it as anything. My theory is that high school and early-college kids don't want to hang out in the same place with the junior high gang where there's pizza and videogames. I've sort of lost touch with college kids, and am not sure right now what they want. So maybe I'll have to do something in New Wave and they'll like it."

He laughs.

Two years ago, Fechter believed he would be doing robotic electronic characters for the rest of his life, turning out new cuddly friends and improving the old ones along the way as the genius hit him.

Now, he's not so sure anymore.

"Sometimes I think I'm spreading myself too thin," he says. "There's an element of quality control that slips when you keep growing. Big isn't always simple. So I'd just like to get back to being a garage inventor again.

"Sure I want to keep on doing Billy Bob; I love Billy Bob and the rest of our characters and I'd like to see them become the greatest entertainment medium to come out of the 1980s.

"I love finding ways to give Mitzi a waist line, or to make Klunk a better drummer, maybe the best drummer in the world, or to introduce a new character to the act, but it isn't always as easy as that.

"It takes a lot of heart and dedication to make something like this work. But sometimes, I think, this corporation has become a monster."

THAT'S SHOWBIZ

(The Journal Herald - September, 1983)

Date of Origin: 1983
Archived: 4-24-08
Submission by VegaNova
Version 1.0

The documents contained herein are for educational use only. Please do not replicate, redistribute, or make any unauthorized printings. All intellectual property including characters, artwork, photography, and slogans are trademark and/or copyright their respective owners.